

What is Prayer?

Objectives are to show:

1. Why Does God Want Us To Pray?
2. The Effectiveness of Prayer
3. Some Important Considerations in Effective Prayer
4. Praise and Thanksgiving

Why Does God Want Us To Pray?

- **Definition:** Prayer is personal communication with God.
- Three Reasons to pray:
 - Prayer expresses our dependence in God and is a means whereby our trust in him can increase.
 - Prayer brings us into deeper fellowship with God, and he loves us and delights in our fellowship with him.
 - Prayer allows us as creatures to be involved in activities that are eternally important.

The Effectiveness of Prayer

- Prayer Changes the Way God Acts (Ex 32:9-10, 2 Chron 7:14, 1 Jn 1:9)
 - Failure to ask deprives us of what God would otherwise have given to us.

“You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask.” (James 4:2 ESV)

“And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.” (Luke 11:9-10 ESV)
 - If we were really convinced that prayer changes the way God acts, and that God does bring about remarkable changes in the world in response to prayer, Why don't we pray?
- Effective Prayer Is Made Possible by Our Mediator, Jesus Christ (Jn 14:6, Heb 7:23-28, 8:1-6, 9:1-14, 10:22)
 - Because we are sinful and God is holy, we have no right on our own to enter into his presence. We need a mediator to come between us and God and to bring us into God's presence.

“For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus,” (1 Tim 2:5 ESV)

The only prayers that God has promised to “hear” in the sense of listening with a sympathetic ear and undertaking to answer when they are made according to his will are the prayers of Christians offered through the one mediator, Jesus Christ!

“For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.” (Heb 9:24 ESV)

- What Is Praying “in Jesus’ Name”?

“Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.” (John 14:13-14 ESV)

“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.” (John 15:16 ESV)

But what does this mean?

- To come in the name of someone means that another person has authorized us to come on his authority, not on our own. (Acts 3:6, 4:7, 16:18)
- The “name” of a person in the ancient world represented the person himself and therefore all of his character.
- This means that praying “in Jesus’ name” is not only praying in his authority, but also praying in a way that is consistent with his character that truly represents him and reflects his manner of life and his own holy will. In this sense, to pray in Jesus’ name comes close to the idea of praying “according to his will”.

“And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.” (1 John 5:14-15 ESV)

- Should We Pray to Jesus and to the Holy Spirit?

- A survey of the prayers of the Old and New Testaments indicates that they are usually addressed neither to God the Son nor to the Holy Spirit, but to God the Father. (Matt 6:9, Jn 16:23, Eph 5:20)
- A mere count of such prayers may be misleading...
 - The majority of the prayers we have recorded in the New Testament are those of Jesus himself
 - In the Old Testament, the Trinitarian nature of God was not so clearly revealed
- Examples of prayers to Jesus...

- *“And they prayed and said, “You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen” (Acts 1:24 ESV)*
- *“And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”” (Acts 7:59 ESV)*
- The conversation between Ananias and “the Lord” in Acts 9:10-16 is with Jesus
- *“He who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming soon.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!” (Rev 22:20 ESV)*
- Jesus is a “merciful and faithful high priest” (Heb 2:17) who is able to “sympathize with our weaknesses” (Heb 4:15) is viewed as an encouragement to us to come boldly before the “throne of grace” in prayer “that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb 4:16).
- Though no prayers directly addressed to the Holy Spirit are recorded in the New Testament, there is nothing that would forbid such prayer, for the Holy Spirit, like the Father and the Son, is fully God and is worthy of prayer and is powerful to answer our prayers.
- To say that we cannot pray to the Holy Spirit is really saying that we cannot talk to him or relate to him personally, which hardly seems right. He also relates to us in a personal way since he is a “Comforter” or “Counselor”. (Jn 14:16, 26) However this is not generally the New Testament pattern.
- The main pattern of the New Testament is to pray to God the Father, through God the Son, and by God the Holy Spirit. And as we pray we must not interchange the persons of the Trinity in a heretical way. For example many pray like this: “Father, I am thankful that you died on the cross for me.” The Father did NOT die on the cross for us!
- The Role of the Holy Spirit in Our Praying
 - “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.” (Rom 8:26-27 ESV)*
 - Interpreters differ on whether the “sighs too deep for words” are the sighs the Holy Spirit himself makes or our own sighs and groans in prayer, which the Holy Spirit makes into effective prayer before God. It seems more likely that the “sighs” or “groans” here are our groans.
 - The word translated “helps” (συναντιλαμβάνομαι) is the same word used in Luke 10:40, where Martha wants Mary to come and help her. The word does not indicate that the Holy Spirit prays instead of us, but that the Holy Spirit takes part with us and makes our weak prayers effective..
 - What does it mean to pray in the Spirit?

- To pray “in the Holy Spirit,” is to pray with the conscious awareness of God’s presence surrounding us and sanctifying both us and our prayers.

Some Important Considerations in Effective Prayer: HELPS & HINDRANCES

- Praying According to God’s Will (1 John 5:14-15, Matt 6:10, 26:39)
 - We should have great confidence that God will answer our prayer when we ask him for something that accords with a specific promise or command of Scripture. For this reason knowledge of Scripture is a tremendous help in prayer, enabling us to follow the patten of first Christians who quoted Scripture when they prayed. (Acts 4:25-26)
 - What happens if scripture doesn’t speak about a certain desire, how should we pray?
 - In such cases, we should ask him for deeper understanding and then pray for what seems best to us, but add, “Nevertheless, if I am wrong in asking this, and if this is not pleasing to you, then do as seems best in your sight,” or, more simply, “If it is your will.”

“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.” (James 1:5-8 ESV)
- Praying with Faith

“Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.” (Mark 11:24 ESV)

 - Jesus is apparently saying that when we ask for something, the kind of faith that will bring results is a settled assurance that when we prayed for something (or perhaps after we had been praying over a period of time), God agreed to grant our specific request.
 - Prayer is never wishful thinking, for it springs from trust in a personal God who wants us to take him at his word. (Matt 21:22, James 1:6)
- Obedience

“If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.” (Psa 66:18 ESV)

“The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord, but the prayer of the upright is acceptable to Him.” (Prov 15:8 ESV)

 - Since prayer is a relationship with God as a person, anything in our lives that displeases him will be a hindrance to prayer. (Prov 15:29, 28:9, 1 Peter 3:7, 12)

- We do not need to be freed from sin completely before God can be expected to answer our prayers. When we come before God through his grace, we come cleansed by the blood of Christ (Rom 3:25, Eph 2:13, Heb 9:14). Yet we must not neglect holiness. Prayer & holy living go together. We need a clear conscience before God when we pray.

“Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.” (1 John 3:21-22 ESV)

- Confession of Sins

- Because our obedience to God is never perfect in this life, we continually depend on his forgiveness for our sins. Confession of sins is necessary in order for God to “forgive us” in the sense of restoring his day-by-day relationship with us. (Matt 6:12, 1 John 1:9, James 5:16)
- It is good when we pray to confess all known sin to the Lord and to ask for his forgiveness.
- With respect to those sins that we do not remember or are unaware of, it is appropriate to pray the general prayer of David, “*Clear me from hidden faults*” (Ps. 19:12)

- Forgiving Others

“For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” (Matt 6:14-15 ESV)

- Our Lord does not have in mind the initial experience of forgiveness we know when we are justified by faith, for that **would not** belong in a prayer that we pray every day. He refers rather to the day-by-day relationship with God that we need to have restored when we have sinned and displeased him. (Mark 11:25)
- Until sin is forgiven and the relationship is restored prayer will of course, be difficult. God declares that he will distance himself from us until we forgive others.

- Humility

“Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.” (Jms 4:10 ESV)

- God is rightly jealous for his own honor. Therefore he is not pleased to answer the prayers of the proud who take honor to themselves rather than giving it to him. True humility before God, which will also be reflected in genuine humility before others, is necessary for effective prayer. (James 4:6, 1 Pet 5:5)

“The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but

beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Luke 18:11-14 ESV)

- Continuing in Prayer Over Time With Persistence
 - When we are earnestly seeking God for an answer to a specific prayer, we may in fact repeat the same request several times. (1 Thess 5:17)
 - We see in Jesus’ life a pattern of much time given to prayer. When great multitudes were following him, “he himself was often withdrawing into the wilderness regions and praying.” (Luke 5:16, 6:12)
 - Such continual devotion to prayer even while about daily duties should characterize the life of every believer. (2 Cor 12:8) We should be persistent knowing that God wants to give us good gifts. (Luke 11:1-13)
- Praying Earnestly
 - Jesus himself, who is our model for prayer, prayed earnestly. *“In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear”* (Heb. 5:7)
 - If we truly begin to see situations as God sees them, if we begin to see the needs of a hurting and dying world as they really are, then it will be natural to pray with intense emotional involvement and to expect God, as a merciful Father, to respond to heartfelt prayer. (Neh 1:4-11)
- Waiting on the Lord

“I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning.” (Psa 130:5-6 ESV)

 - Waiting patiently for an answer shows my earnestness, my sense of expectancy, and my respect for God. (Ps 27:14, 28:15)
 - As earnest Christians we are to come before God, gain a sense of being in his presence, earnestly pour out our requests to him, and then wait quietly for some sense of assurance of God’s answer.
- Praying in Private

“And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” (Matt 6:5-6 ESV)

- There is wisdom in Jesus' encouragement to pray in secret, not only that we might avoid hypocrisy, but also that we might not be distracted by the presence of other people and therefore modify our prayers to suit what we think they will expect to hear.
- Praying with Others
 - Believers find strength in praying together with others. In fact, Jesus teaches us, *"Again, I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them"* (Matt. 18:19-20) - **NOTE:** This is prayer in the context of Church Discipline. The two or three mentioned are the witnesses referred to in the previous verses.
 - Praying with others, then, is also right and often increases our faith and the effectiveness of our prayers. (1 Kings 8:22-53, Acts 4:24)
- Prayer is often connected with Fasting
 - Prayer is often connected with fasting in Scripture (Daniel 9:3, Esth 4:3, Joel 2:12, Acts 13:2, 14:23). Sometimes these are occasions of intense supplication before God, as when Nehemiah, on hearing of the ruin of Jerusalem, *"continued fasting and praying before the God of Heaven"* (Neh. 1:4)
 - Several benefits come from fasting, all of which affect our relationship to God:
 - Fasting increases our sense of humility and dependence on the Lord (for our hunger and physical weakness continually remind us how we are not really strong in ourselves but need the Lord)
 - Fasting allows us to give more attention to prayer (for we are not spending time on eating)
 - Fasting is a continual reminder that, just as we sacrifice some personal comfort to the Lord by not eating, so we must continually sacrifice all of ourselves to Him.
 - Fasting is a good exercise in self-discipline, for as we refrain from eating food, which we would ordinarily desire, it also strengthens our ability to refrain from sin, to which we might otherwise be tempted to yield.
 - Fasting also heightens spiritual and mental alertness and a sense of God's presence as we focus less on the material things of this world (such as food) and as the energies of our body are freed from digesting and processing food.
 - Fasting expresses earnestness and urgency in our prayers: if we continued to fast, eventually we would die. Therefore, in a symbolic way, fasting says to God that we are prepared to lay down our lives that the situation be changed rather than that it continue. Fasting says we hunger for God's presence & help in our spiritual life more than we hunger for food that sustains physical life.
- What About Unanswered Prayer?
 - We must begin by recognizing that as long as God is God and we are his creatures, there must be some unanswered prayers. This is because God keeps hidden his own wise plans for the future, and even though people pray, many events will not come about until the time that God has decreed.

- Prayer is also unanswered at times because we don't always pray as we ought, nor do we pray according to God's will, and we do not always ask in faith. Joseph no doubt prayed earnestly to be rescued from the pit and from being carried off into slavery in Egypt (Gen 37:23-36), but many years later he found how in all of these events 'God meant it for good.' (Gen 50:20)
- When we face unanswered prayer, we join the company of Jesus, who prayed, *"Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless not my will, but yours, be done"* (Luke 22:42). (Paul - 2 Cor 12:8-9, David - 2 Sam 12:20,23)
- When prayer remains unanswered we must continue to trust God, who *"causes all things to work together for good"* (Rom. 8:28 NASB), and to cast our cares on him, knowing that he continually cares for us (1 Peter 5:7). We must keep remembering that he will give strength sufficient for each day (Deut. 33:25) and that he has promised, *"I will never fail you nor forsake you"* (Heb. 13:5; cf. Rom. 8:35-39).
- But sometimes prayers will remain unanswered in this life. At times God will answer those prayers after the believer dies. At other times he will not, but even then the faith expressed in those prayers and their heartfelt expressions of love for God and the people he has made will still ascend as a pleasing incense before God's throne (Rev. 5:8; 8:3-4) and will result in *"praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ"* (1 Peter 1:7).

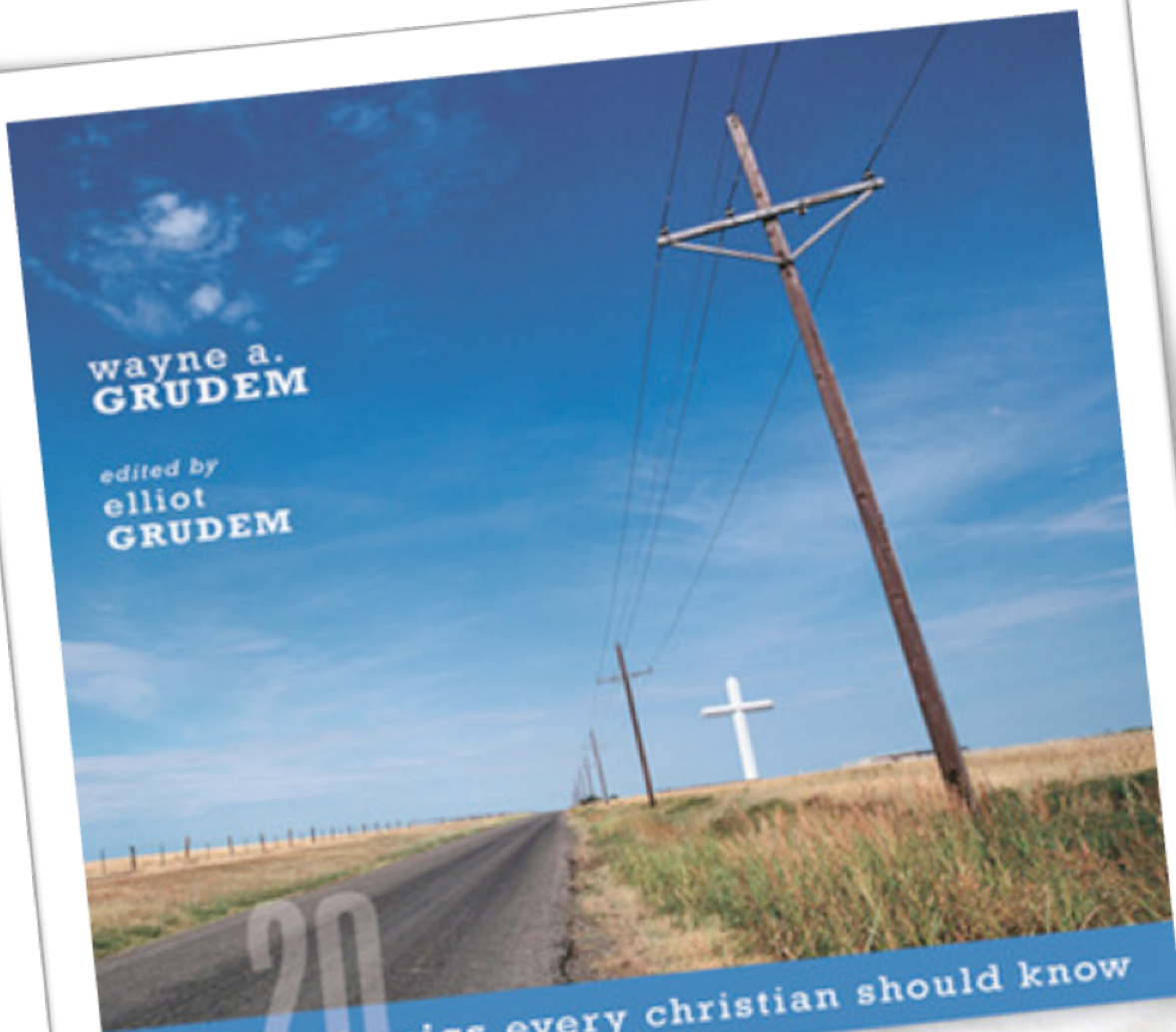
Praise and Thanksgiving

- Thanksgiving, like every other aspect of prayer, should not be a mechanical mouthing of a "thank you" to God, but the expression of words that reflect the thankfulness of our hearts.
- The kind of thanksgiving that appropriately accompanies prayer must express thankfulness to God for all circumstances, for every event of life that he allows to come to us. When we join our prayers with humble, childlike thanksgiving to God *"in all circumstances"* (1 Thess. 5:18), they will be acceptable to God.

Questions for Review and Application

1. Do you often have difficulty with prayer? What things in this chapter have been helpful to you in this regard?
2. When have you known the most effective times of prayer in your own life? What factors contributed to making those times more effective? Which other factors need most attention in your prayer life? What can you do to strengthen each of these areas?
3. How does it help and encourage you (if it does) when you pray together with other Christians?
4. Have you ever tried waiting quietly before the Lord after making an earnest prayer request? If so, what has been the result?

5. Do you have a regular time each day for private Bible reading and prayer? Are you sometimes easily distracted and turned aside to other activities? If so, how can distractions be overcome?
6. Do you enjoy praying? Why or why not?



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20
twenty basics every christian should know

CHRISTIAN BELIEFS

Week 4: What Is Prayer?